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'Urban-green-left zealots' are hurting future of Indigenous people, Jason Kenney says

After Teck Resources pulled the plug, Kenney vented his frustration in a phone call with Trudeau. People in both offices say the call went poorly

By **Stuart Thomson**
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Alberta Premier Jason Kenney speaks about Teck's Frontier mine cancellation during a press conference in Edmonton, on Feb. 24, 2020. PHOTO BY IAN KUCERAK/POSTMEDIA

Alberta Premier Jason Kenney accused the "urban-green-left zealots" of denying Indigenous people a chance of a prosperous

future as the fallout from the Teck mine decision reverberated throughout Canada. Teck Resources withdrew its application Sunday night to build a giant oilsands mine in the province's northeast.

Kenney's United Conservative government accused the Liberal government for the decision, particularly the dense fog of regulatory uncertainty created by Prime Minister Justin Trudeau's environmental policies.

"There is absolutely no doubt that this decision was taken in large part because of regulatory uncertainty, endless delays created by the national government, as well as the general atmosphere of lawlessness that we have seen take hold of parts of our country and much of our economic infrastructure in the past three weeks," Kenney said at a press conference Monday.

Reconciliation does not mean locking Indigenous people into permanent poverty

"I really say to the urban-green-left zealots who have been trying to appropriate the cause of First Nations that what in fact you are doing is slamming the door shut on their economic and social future. The government and the people of Alberta are determined to overcome that zealotry from the far left to be partners in prosperity with our Indigenous people."

He added, "Reconciliation does not mean locking Indigenous people into permanent poverty."

Meanwhile, Rachel Notley's opposition Alberta NDP accused Kenney of treating the project like a political football and putting the federal government in an impossible situation, forced to choose between stark opposition in Quebec and a furious bloc of western Canadians.

Trudeau's government agreed with Teck Resources' reasoning that "global investors and consumers are increasingly looking for the cleanest products available and sustainable resource development."

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However, the company also said — in a section not quoted by the federal government, "Unfortunately, the growing debate around this issue has placed Frontier and our company squarely at the nexus of much broader issues that need to be resolved."

Speaking to reporters on Monday, Conservative leader Andrew Scheer was blunt. "Make no mistake: Justin Trudeau killed Teck Frontier," Scheer said.

On Sunday, after the Teck decision was announced, people in Kenney's office complained about the federal government's silence in recent weeks about the project, something the premier interpreted as a lack of any real desire to approve it.

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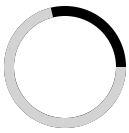
"The only real communications from the feds was trial balloons going up in the media," said one senior Alberta government source, who wasn't authorized to speak publicly about the relationship with the federal government.

After Teck Resources pulled the plug, Kenney vented his frustration in a phone call with Trudeau. People in both offices say the call went poorly with Kenney blaming Trudeau's delays and endless processes for killing the project and the prime minister disagreeing strenuously.

Later, Trudeau's office released a relatively tranquil summary of the conversation. The two men agreed on the importance of the resource sector, re-affirmed their shared commitment to keep creating good jobs and hoped for a peaceful solution to the blockades grinding parts of the country's rail network to a standstill, the report from the Prime Minister's Office read.



Kenney's office soon released a rebuttal to the PMO readout, a rare move for a premier.

"This readout omits Premier Kenney's strong and direct expression of frustration at the federal government's lack of urgency and organization on the Frontier decision, which we have been raising with them for months. Premier Kenney reminded the prime minister that we have been asking repeatedly to work with their government get to a yes on the Frontier project and have been met repeatedly with delay or indecision," the Alberta government's response reads.

"Premier Kenney made it clear that it should never have come to this last minute jamming of Teck into a corner where they felt withdrawing their application — and depriving Alberta and First Nations of enormous potential benefits — was their only option."

What comes next for Alberta's resource sector is even more uncertain.

About 20 oil sands projects are inoperative despite receiving approval and Kenney's government has expressed concern that no more major projects will get approved under the current regime. Oil prices continue to swoon, relative to recent history in Alberta,

which adds to the problems facing new and existing projects.

People in Kenney's office wonder what this decision means for any future projects.

"These guys did everything right and they're hanging on a political cabinet decision," said one senior Alberta government source. "There's no path to yes."

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